

# ON THE ROAD

Low-alcohol beer and an underpowered Korean car. Not the ideal ingredients for an all-American road trip. But as our man found by way of Route Six, there's more to Utah than Mormons and mountains

Words & photos: Andy Waterman





**D**riving though the desert at 70mph, I'm starring in my own road movie with the Pixies' *Trompe le Monde*, turned up to 11, serving as the soundtrack. In front of me, the glimmering highway pierces the heat haze; to the side, red rock and tarmac blur into the most spectacular landscapes I've ever seen.

In my mind I'm Dean Moriarty, gunning a Chevy from coast to coast in a mescaline-fuelled frenzy. In truth, I'm on my way to Moab in an underpowered Hyundai Accent, with nothing stronger than a Starbucks macchiato to keep me awake.

Within minutes of leaving the confines of the airport, I'm on the freeway being overtaken on both sides, desperately trying to work out what I should be doing with my left foot, breathing a sigh of relief as I swing onto a slip road for the relative sanity of Route Six. That doesn't last long and I almost headbutt the steering wheel at the first set of lights, trying to brake with my left foot.

The drive is the best part of 250 miles through the most sparsely populated country I've ever encountered; 50 miles go by without seeing any sign of human existence beyond the road in front of me. I'm in Utah for the riding; the all-American roadtrip experience is an unexpected bonus.

Route Six morphs into Highway 191 then Interstate 70; followed by a junction, then back into Highway 191 for the home run. Just 40 miles to go to Moab and its promise of singletrack enlightenment.

### Getting high

This trip doesn't start on the road to Moab, however. Before it can really begin, I have the small matter of a Cannondale product launch to attend to in Park City.

A missed connection in Chicago added 10 painful hours to the journey — thanks US border control — and sleep was difficult that first night. Arriving in darkness, I put it down to exhaustion and the time difference. It was only in the morning that I realised it was actually the altitude. The hotel, part of the Canyons Resort, was well above 2,000m.

Park City is a ski town, 30 minutes outside Salt Lake City and home to the Sundance film festival, much of the 2002 Winter Olympics and hundreds of miles of singletrack. It's considered the most liberal city in Utah and holds major influence given its tiny permanent population of just 8,000.

It's easy to see why Cannondale hosted its 2011 launch here: the 350 miles of municipal trails around the town are incredible, easily enough to keep my heavy eyelids from drooping and make the long, steep, oxygen-depleted climbs worthwhile.

We ride a combination of singletrack loops and lift-assisted descents, typically starting with a couple of hours of cross-



country before taking the lift back up to ride the final descent once more. We came to Utah expecting a desert, covered in the super-smooth slickrock Moab is famous for — but in Park City we find densely wooded alpine singletrack, grippy dirt, cool evening temperatures and groves of white Aspen.

In the evenings we head into Park City's tiny downtown. Utah's alcohol laws have always been strict and it's still one of 18 'Control States' where the state has a monopoly on sales of liquor stronger than 3.2 per cent by weight (equivalent to four per cent by volume as we measure it in the UK).

Up until March 2009 you even needed to become a member of any bar in which you wanted to buy a drink before you could be served. Given the anti-alcohol stance, it came as a surprise to find that beer production is such a cottage industry.

Every town seems to have its own micro-brewery, selling dozens of craft ales in a multitude of different styles, from German Hefeweizens, to Belgian wheat beers, American lagers and English IPAs. Weak beer is no bad thing when you want to try a few and you're still fighting jetlag and the dehydrating effects of altitude.

### Bluffing it

With the business side of things tied up, I hitched a ride back to Salt Lake from Park City to pick up the crummy jalopy and hit the road again, destination: Moab.

On arrival, Moab lived up to my preconceptions of small-town America with a single main street lined by low rise buildings, filled with dozens of small "ma 'n' pa" businesses, restaurants and cafes. I immediately liked it.

Getting there in the middle of the day, the heat was pretty stifling. Stepping out of the air-conditioned Accent was like stepping into an oven. It was 40 °C

**"Moab lived up to my preconceptions of small-town America with a single main street lined by low-rise buildings"**

Getting to the trail head is easier than following it



Park City's municipal singletrack was a massive surprise



It's getting hot in here: Klondike Bluffs





Joining the dots on Slickrock

degrees and zero humidity. How can an opaque Englishman be expected to ride in blistering heat like that?

Travelling solo, my first day of riding starts early. I am dressed, breakfasted and on the road by 7am having been warned by the guys at Rim Tours, a local MTB guiding company, to aim to be finished by 11am.

The first day of riding consists of the Klondike Bluffs trail in the morning followed by the iconic Slickrock trail in the evening.

Klondike Bluffs turns out to be a gentle introduction to desert riding. A bluff is a steep cliff and it's only at the viewpoint of the trail's summit that you get to see the bluffs that gives the trail its name.

The return route presented two options, either follow my tracks home or take the Baby Steps singletrack descent. I choose the latter. When the landscape is made purely of rock, with only sporadic distractions of trees and cacti, marking out a trail must be a fairly easy task — you simply brush away the top layer of dust, paint an arrow on the ground and hey presto, you have a trail.

Tearing across bald expanses of rock at ever increasing speeds, I soon discover the downside to Utah's low-fi trailbuilding style — you easily lose your bearings. Riding alone with no one to follow, this was especially true. Every time I seemed to get the measure of it, I'd find myself having to slow down to look for the next marker. Not that I wasn't having fun, I just knew it would be even better the second time around. But with the mercury already nudging a blistering 40 degrees by the time I reach the bottom at 10.30am, there's no chance in hell I'm going back up for second attempt.

### Not so slick

I leave riding the Slickrock Trail till about 6pm, and as I make my way round the skills loop I can't help but stop every hundred metres to take a photo. The problem with this approach soon makes itself apparent: I'm running out of daylight.

Photographers call that fine moment before dusk the magic hour: the time when the light glimmers so perfectly it casts a favourable glow on everything. Combining shooting with trying to get back before it got completely dark meant I was riding it in a blind panic, and I'm not sure if this clouded my judgement of the legendary Slickrock.

This is a trail I grew up lusting after, and I know I'm



not alone. While we were back in the UK, aimlessly riding round crappy patches of woodland and messing about in the occasional bomb hole, the US had a trail that seemed to be as smooth as a skate park and was made up entirely of bomb holes. It's the kind of place where you could play for days without getting bored, just rolling around, barely pedalling to maintain momentum.

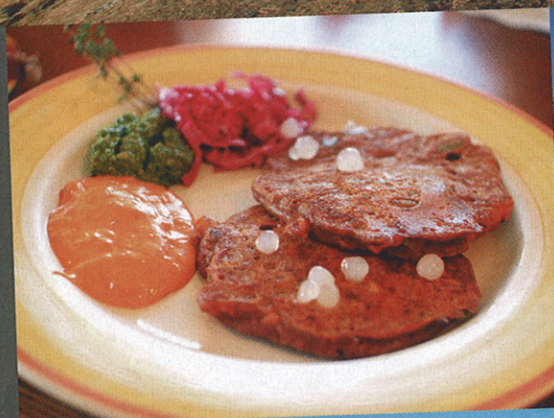
Reality was always going to struggle to live up to those teenage dreams. And so it proved. That problem of joining the dots presented itself again, and seeking out the next marker was made all the more difficult by the low sun, blinding me over the crests of the rocks. Those transitions aren't skatepark smooth either, as I soon learn bottoming out my shocks, knees and elbows on the first drop into a compression.

I finally arrive back at the car at 9pm. Ten minutes later, it's pitch dark. I'd ridden the trail as fast as I could and I've only just made it back. My thirst for adventure quenched, I pass out as soon as my head hits the pillow.

### Porcupine Rim

Sleep may have come easy, but getting up at 6.30am doesn't, even with the promise of a shuttle to 9,000ft to ride the Porcupine Rim trail. For this ride at least I have a guide in the form of Rob from Rim Tours. After little human contact for two days, I'm glad of the company. Although the trail is well waymarked, there are enough twists and turns to make following someone a faster, more enjoyable and far better experience.

It's 8am by the time we arrive at the campsite that doubles as the trailhead for the Porcupine Rim. As we'd climbed into the mountains, the temperature had dropped and the predominant colour had turned from red to green. Swinging weary legs over weary bikes, we quickly wave goodbye to tree cover as the trail winds its way out onto flower-covered alpine meadows. From this height you can see the canyons below, »



Above: Rattlesnake Fritters at Torrey's Café Diablo



The drop-off point for Porcupine Rim



**"I grew up lusting after Slickrock Trail, it's the kind of place where you could play for days without getting bored"**



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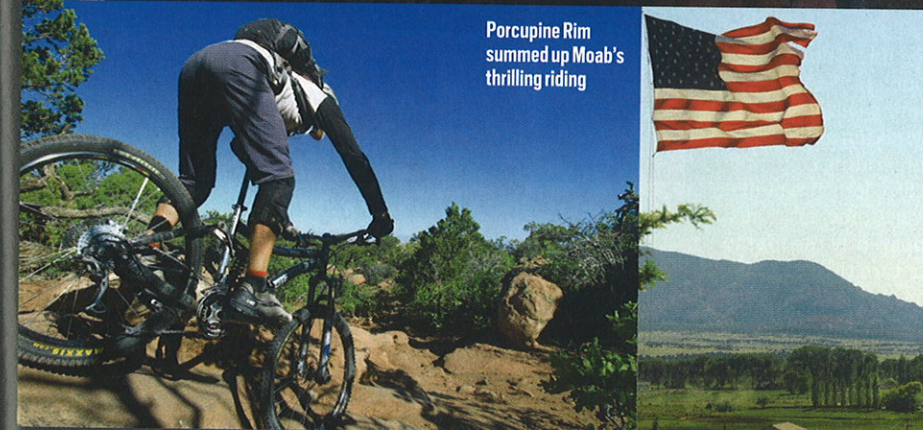
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**"The Porcupine Rim trail was challenging, a proper journey and fun all the way"**

Amasa Back: big rocks and big views



Porcupine Rim summed up Moab's thrilling riding

not that we were looking; we were simply enjoying the constant, fast-flowing corners.

Rob knows every inch of the trail, so as long as I keep him in sight, I can go as fast as I want. If you decide to ride Porcupine Rim, get a guide: it's money well spent. The price depends on group size, but if you bring your own bike, one-to-one guiding costs \$155.

We arrive back in town at lunchtime, exhausted. The way the trail developed was at least partly the reason. At the top, those alpine meadows hadn't called for much mental exertion, but the final section had drained my energy with tricky, trials-style manoeuvres needed to squeeze through narrow rock gaps and keep on the best lines.

If one trail highlights all that's best about riding in Moab, I didn't find any to beat the Porcupine Rim trail. It was challenging, a proper journey and fun all the way.

We finish the ride at the Moab brewery for a burger and pint of 'Sit down, shut up & hold on', an unfiltered Belgian wheat beer that sold itself with a picture of a bike on the label. Moab's brewers know their market.

#### Amasa Back

Another day, another early start; another clear blue sky and rapidly rising mercury. The average temperature in Moab in June is 34 degrees and the town gets less than 1cm of rain in the whole month, so you can guarantee good weather during the summer — although April and May or September and October are the best times to go.

For this final ride I head out with Kirstin Petersen and Matt Heberd, owners and founders of Rim Tours and pioneering mountain bikers both. Amasa Back is actually a 4x4 trail, not that you could

imagine anything with an engine getting near it, such are the size of the rocks.

Again, it's good to be out riding with the locals. Kirstin and Matt have lived in Moab for decades and tell me more about the history of mountain biking here, how it started from a single bike-hire business, originally set up by two miners who'd been made redundant from the town's previous boom industry, uranium mining.

As we ride from the car park to the trailhead, Kirstin points out ancient Native American art carved onto the cliffs. It's hard to see the figures at first, but like a magic eye puzzle, they eventually presented themselves: primitive stick figures of man and beast, and other less obvious figures, high up the side of the cliff.

The ride itself is fun; the views, reliably spectacular, and the company, superb — just what I need after two intense days, and exactly what bike riding holidays are for.

I spend the afternoon exploring the town, and driving further out into the rolling hills. From high above the Colorado River, by Pinto Arch, I watch the sun setting across Dead Horse Point state park.

#### Voting Torrey

It's a 150-mile drive west from Moab to Torrey and by the time I arrive at my hotel, I've completely run out of superlatives to describe the landscapes I've passed en route.

The final part of the journey has taken me through the Capitol Reef National Park, which, after dropping my gear off at the »





hotel, is my first port of call. There's no mountain biking in the Park, but that doesn't mean it's not worth a stop.

I hike up to the Hickman Natural Bridge, probably the most remarkable geological phenomenon I've ever seen: a naturally formed 60ft high rock arch. Breathtaking.

That night I eat rattlesnake for the first time at Café Diablo on Torrey's main street. It had been shredded into fritters, which tasted like onion bhajis. A small reminder of home. I wonder what they do with the rattle.

I only had a single day to ride in Torrey, and my first ride was the Sand Creek trail, joined by Mike, the owner of the hotel I was staying at. They don't see so many mountain bikers in these parts, so what the trails lacked in waymarking, they made up for in an ever-present sense of adventure.

Sand Creek struggled to compete with Moab and Capitol Reef National Park, but was a decent leg stretcher, and a chance to get some local knowledge from Mike.

I took his advice and drove south on Highway 12 to Boulder (not there; Boulder, Utah) after our ride, the car struggling at over 3,000m altitude; quite literally a 'high' way. Burr Trail Road is worth the drive, forging its way between sheer cliffs only marginally wider than the singletrack road.

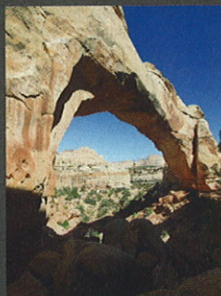
On my way back, I stop at the Dixie Forest visitor centre. A hugely friendly and helpful old mountain man pointed out the best bike-friendly trails and what direction to ride them in. All he asked from me was to sign the guestbook and put a pin in the map to show where I was from. It was clear from the map that this is territory not many Brits ever get to see — a dozen or so pins were the sole representatives from the whole of the UK. The modest pin count increases by one on my exit.

Riding in the Dixie Forest is brilliant, if hard work. Starting at 2,700m above sea level, I climb from there, still well below the



Exploring unspoilt singletrack in Dixie Forest


tree line. Starting on doubletrack, I soon find myself on a walking and horseriding trail, and before long unspoilt singletrack, my tyres apparently the first to venture this far into the mountains. Three hours' riding and I don't see a single other soul. The riding around Torrey might not have matched that in Moab, but the scenery and the soaring sense of adventure both consistently exceeded all expectations.



## The end of the road

In 10 days, I've covered 850 miles by road, but fewer than 100 on the bike. In some way, every mile I'd travelled had been iconic, exhilarating, life-changing even.

I'd ticked off the teenage dream of riding Moab and wasn't going home disappointed. Utah had enchanted me with its variety, its wide-open spaces and incredible riding opportunities. Like all good roadtrips, I felt I could keep on going. I'd seen so much, the wanderlust in me was asking what I could see and do if I just stayed longer?

Who knows when I'll be back? Next time I'm getting a campervan — either that or a red Chevy Corvette convertible — and I'm taking company. Travelling solo was fun, and in many ways cathartic, but Utah is an experience that should be shared. 

## FACTFILE

### Getting there

There are numerous options for flying to Salt Lake City. We flew London to Chicago, then took a connection to Salt Lake, all with [www.united.com](http://www.united.com). This is economical, but slow. Speak to your travel agent for more comfortable options. Flying to Las Vegas and hiring a car from there is an option, especially on longer trips.

### Where to stay

There are plenty of campsites in the national parks, visit [www.cruiseamerica.com](http://www.cruiseamerica.com) for RV hire. Moab is rideable for most of the year. It would be possible to combine skiing/snowboarding and riding in March/April by going to Park City for spring snow first before travelling south to Moab for mtb'ing afterwards.

In Park City we stayed at the Canyons resort ([www.thecanyons.com](http://www.thecanyons.com)). All our guiding in Moab was courtesy of the fine people at Rim Tours ([www.rimtours.com](http://www.rimtours.com)). For a bike shop and shuttles in Moab, visit: [www.poisonspiderbicycles.com](http://www.poisonspiderbicycles.com).

In Torrey, we stayed at the Sandstone Inn ([www.sandstonecapitolreef.com](http://www.sandstonecapitolreef.com)). We ate at Café Diablo ([www.cafediablo.net](http://www.cafediablo.net)).

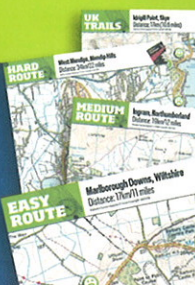
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